And a-noon þe creature was stablyd in hir wyttys & in her reson as wel as euyr sche was be-forn, and preyd hir husbond as so soon as he cam to hir þat sche myght haue þe keys of þe botery [buttery] to takyn hir mete & drynke as sche had don be-forn. Hyr maydens & hir kepars counseld hym he xulde [should] deluyr hir no keys, for þei seyd sche wold but ðeue [give] away swech [such] good as þer was, for sche wyst not what sche seyde as þei wende [thought]. Neuyr-þe-les, hir husbond, euyr hauyng tendyynes & compassyon of hir, comawndyd þei xulde deluyr to hir þe keyys.¹

That delivery of the household keys marks Margery Kempe’s recovery from the madness which had kept her confined to her bed for eight months following the birth of her first child. The keys embody the circumscribed, but real, authority over her household, its resources and its servants which, as a married woman of the urban elite, she might normally expect. Her servants, perhaps aware of the sometimes inconvenient consequences of religious conversion, fear that Margery, like other urban holy women, will engage in excessive charity, but at this stage her vocation takes less dramatic forms, and she is content to resume her former role in the household. Margery does not tell us what she did with the keys once she had regained them. Her Book is interested in housewifery only when it can be shown to have spiritual significance, as when Margery undertakes the nursing of her aged husband as a penance for her earlier sins (p. 181). Margery and her amanuenses assume that she is of interest only insofar as she is not a housewife, and her later spiritual career demands that she leave the house and her duties there. This chapter is about the life she refused, and about everything symbolized by her keys.

We are concerned here, paradoxically in a companion to medieval women writers, with the vast majority of medieval women who wrote nothing more than family letters and household accounts, if that; who were not mystics; who apparently accepted the roles prescribed for them. There are too many

¹
variables to attempt here a full-scale survey of the lives of medieval laywomen in their households. Class, location, and life-cycle all intersect with gender: general statements about the experience of medieval women almost invariably need qualification. P. J. P. Goldberg’s study of the records of York’s ecclesiastical court finds fluctuations in women’s circumstances over relatively short periods of time and within relatively minor differences of status: urban young women in the late fourteenth century had more autonomy than their rural sisters in their choice of husbands. One version of the didactic poem, ‘The Good Wife Taught her Daughter’, assumes that a housewife will routinely sell goods in the market place, and warns her only not to get drunk on the proceeds; yet John Paston III wrote of his sister’s marriage to the family’s steward: ‘he shold neuer haue my good wyll for to make my sustyr to selle kandyll and mustard in Framlyngham’. Entirely proper wifely behaviour in the one case is a shocking breach of class status in the other, perhaps all the more so because of the Pastons’ relatively recent rise to gentility. Even ‘lay women’ is not as clear-cut a category as it initially appears: many vowesses continued to live in the world, combining the management of property with religious observance, and nuns in this period increasingly withdrew from the communal life to form households within convents. Lay women and nuns visited each other, and set down in one another’s spaces both groups probably felt quite at home.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some persistent themes by concentrating on depictions of women within and without their households, and the kinds of behaviour considered appropriate to each location, focusing both on historical evidence of household-based activity and on the literary and didactic texts in which these activities were prescribed, imagined, and policed. Sources of all kinds confirm that the house is the privileged locus for medieval women: notionally, this is where the good woman can be found, busy about her domestic duties. The Book of Proverbs defines female virtue and female vice with reference to domestic space. In a passage containing the germ of the medieval conduct book, the good woman is placed in the household, and valued for her work there, particularly the provision of food and clothing to household members. This biblical ideal evidently remained relevant, for Christine de Pizan paraphrased it as advice to women of the urban elite. The harlot, conversely, is ‘talkative and wandering, not bearing to be quiet, not able to abide still at home, now abroad, now in the streets, now lying in wait near the corners’. The opposition between the good woman in the household and the bad woman in the street continues to inform medieval texts of all genres, which write gendered morality in spatial terms. ‘Wandrype by the weye’, in The Canterbury Tales, is a transparent euphemism for female sexual transgression, an activity automatically suspected of any woman in

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the wrong place. It is perhaps unsurprising that the anchoritic readership of *Ancrene Wisse* should be warned of the dangers of leaving the anchorhold by the example of Dina, and yet the same exemplum is apparently equally relevant to the non-enclosed aristocratic secular women addressed some two hundred years later by *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. Both texts acknowledge that Dina was the victim of rape, which, nevertheless, she is held to have invited by the act of leaving the house: as the Knight explains, ‘by a foolyshe woman cometh many euyllis & domages’. A woman outside of her proper location is by definition ‘a foolyshe woman’. This perception can be shown to have influenced practice: Goldberg argues that Thomas Nesfeld of York relied on Proverbs when opposing his wife Margery’s petition for a separation on the grounds of cruelty. Thomas’s witnesses successfully claimed that his violence against Margery was provoked and justified by her refusal to stay within the household: ‘the said Margery left her home in the parish of Bishophill and went to a house, the which this witness does not remember, in the city of York without and contrary to the said Thomas, her husband’s mandate and precept, and stayed there from noon of that day until the darkness of night’. The court’s rejection of Margery’s petition testifies to its disapproval of such behaviour. Even Christine de Pizan’s celebration of both the domestic and non-domestic achievements of women, often identified as protofeminist, locates them firmly in an architecture, a City of Ladies conceptualized as a household headed by the Virgin Mary.

Women were found in the medieval household as its permanent or temporary head, as wives, daughters, boarders, servants, and apprentices, all categories with differing privileges and responsibilities. They were always in a minority in elite households, which were staffed largely by men who performed many of the tasks usually classified as female today, such as cooking and cleaning, leaving only laundry and sewing as female preserves. Sewing, however, was so strongly associated with women that the Virgin Mary herself miraculously appeared to Thomas Becket to help him to mend his hair-breeches. The lists of the household of Sir John Howard in 1455 and 1467 confirm men’s numerical dominance: in the first list Howard’s mother, wife, and four daughters are attended by five gentlewomen, and the only other woman in the entire household is the wife of one of the yeomen. There are thirty-four gentlemen and yeomen servants. In the 1467 list the number of gentlewomen has risen to seven, and ‘Margery Alpha and her dawter’ appear among the grooms; meanwhile the household has expanded considerably, now maintaining ninety-one gentlemen, yeomen, and grooms. A woman would usually have headed a household only in widowhood, though this was not an uncommon occurrence. However, as we will see, women of gentry level and above might temporarily head the household while their
husbands were absent: thus all such wives had to have the necessary skills to run the household. The medieval household was typically based around a nuclear family but also frequently included more distant relatives as well as unrelated people in various capacities. Adolescent or young adult children might move into other households as servants, boarders or apprentices, depending on the relative status of the two households. Margaret Paston, for example, asked her son to find a gentlewoman prepared to take his sister as a boarder, ‘for we be eythere of vs wery of othere’ (i, no. 201). These younger women were presumably trained to run their own future households by observing the senior lady, their mother, hostess, or employer: as Agnes Paston reminded her daughter Elizabeth when she paid for her to stay with Lady Pole, ‘che must vse hyr-selfe to werke redyly as other jentylwomen don’ (i, no. 28). Such work surely included learning household management. While in others’ households, such young women were under their authority and protection: employers might, for example, take on the familial responsibility of arranging servants’ marriages.19

What did women do within households? As we would expect, they did domestic labour, but the division between domestic and non-domestic does not match the modern one. The virtuous housewife of Proverbs, whose labour is entirely within and for the benefit of her household, is, in the context of medieval England, an idealized figure. The household was not only conceived of as a private sphere: it was both family dwelling and workplace. Although the actual activities which took place in the household obviously varied considerably across social levels, women were routinely found as active partners of their male relatives running the family business, whether that was a small farm, an urban workshop, or a great estate. Female apprentices learnt a trade as well as domestic skills within the household, and it was entirely usual for artisans in some crafts to train their wives and daughters to assist them.20 Rural women brewed ale primarily to provide for their households but also sold the surplus to neighbours: domestic labour here led readily to commercial enterprise.21 Margery Kempe’s business ventures began with brewing, a traditionally female occupation. Although Margery was well enough informed about the technicalities of the work to identify its problems – ‘þe berm [barm] wold fallyn down þat alle þe ale was lost’ – she did not brew herself, but funded the enterprise and employed servants (pp. 9–10). In this instance a woman’s household task was transformed into a large-scale commercial concern, so that she became ‘on of þe grettest brewers in þe town N. a iij ȝer or iiiij’ (p. 9). Her next venture, into milling, perhaps shows her using the confidence gained from the first to branch out into commercial activities not usually associated with women, but she still, tactically, identified the enterprise as domestic, ‘a newe huswyfre’ (p. 10).
Farther down the social scale there is evidence of the variety of women’s activities within the household. The ‘Ballad of the Tyrannical Husband’ lists the duties of a ploughman’s wife with no servant: milking, making butter and cheese, caring for children, tending poultry, brewing, baking, cooking, cleaning, making linen and woollen cloth. The list thus includes many activities that would be performed in elite households by male servants. While the husband is identified with just one job, ploughing, which is located outside the household, the wife is envisaged as being centred in the household, but not entirely confined to it: she goes to the green to see to her geese, for example. The ballad thus imagines a fairly strict gendered division of labour, and its lost conclusion would presumably have mocked the husband’s inability to cope with his wife’s tasks. Its picture of women’s labour is to some degree idealized: Barbara Hanawalt finds that ‘medieval peasant women did not spend much of their time producing from scratch the basic necessities for their families’ and relied in part on specialists for activities such as weaving and brewing. The ‘Anonymous Husbandry’ is less rigid in its gendered allocation of tasks on a large estate: the dairy may be supervised by a man or a woman, although this is evidently normally a woman’s job: ‘if it were a man he ought to do the same things a dairymaid would do’, perhaps because a woman is cheaper to employ than a man. The dairymaid’s duties include winnowing corn with a female assistant, caring for ‘small stock’ such as poultry and piglets, as well as preparing butter and cheese from the milk of the cows and sheep (p. 424, 428). Rural women might also work alongside men doing the same jobs: the ‘Husbandry’ counts such women as, administratively, men: ‘you should engage the reapers in a team, that is to say five men or women (hommes ou femmes), whichever you wish, and whom you term “men” (ke hom appelle des hommes), make one team’ (p. 445).

Paradoxically, the private life of nobility and gentry almost always had a public aspect. Noblewomen and gentlewomen frequently ran estates in the temporary or permanent absence of their husbands, who were frequently called away to court, to war, or to deal with business or litigation. Robert Grosseteste’s Household Rules for the Countess of Lincoln write indifferently of ‘how lord or lady can examine their demesne estate’: lordship is the same activity whether performed by lord or lady. Rowena E. Archer identifies numerous examples of noblewomen administering their estates. Philippa Maddern argues that the Paston family’s definition of honourable behaviour included many activities, such as maintaining relationships with clients, patrons, and friends, which were as likely to be done by women as by men even when the men were at home. The women of the Paston family were central to the family’s project, and many of their activities were not gender-specific.
The activities of Margaret, wife of John Paston I, offer a convenient example. The Paston Letters typically show Margaret located in one of the Paston households in Norwich and Norfolk – she only once visited London – while John was absent, usually in London. How they shared responsibilities when he was at home is unclear, as there are of course no letters covering these periods. The letters covering their separations show Margaret tirelessly representing the Paston interests: collecting rents, ordering woods felled, selling wool, involving herself in marriage negotiations, and both reporting on and participating in the shifting networks of friendship, affinity, and clientage so essential to the maintenance of the family’s position and property. In a letter of 1449 she apologizes for moving from one Paston household to another for fear of kidnapping: ‘be-seching you þat þe be not displeysyd þow I be com fro þat place þat 3e left me in’ (i, no. 132). Her rhetoric of having been placed in a household by her husband writes her as far more passive than her actions suggest that she actually was: the letter is itself a performance of good wifeliness as well as a report on events. Despite her apology, she had assessed the situation and made the decision to move: she exercised effective autonomy within a fictive framework of deference and passivity. The threat of kidnapping was to be taken seriously: a year earlier, anticipating the need to defend their manor of Gresham, she famously wrote to John with a shopping list of crossbows, almonds, sugar, and cloth for the children’s gowns. In this letter Margaret made the military judgment that the manor of Gresham could not be defended with longbows and so crossbows would be needed. She also, presumably, planned to spend the quieter moments of the siege seeing to the family’s clothing and food supplies (i, no. 130). Although she was later to complain to her son that soldiers ‘set not be [would not take orders from] a woman as thei shuld set be a man’, it is clear from John Paston’s petition to the Chancellor, complaining that ‘riotous peple brake, dispoiled, and drew doun the place of your seid besecher in the seid toun and drafe out his wiff and seruauntes there beyng’, that she remained in residence at Gresham to oversee its defence in person (i, nos. 199, 38). Margaret’s own term for this aspect of her role was ‘captenesse’, a word otherwise unrecorded in Middle English and so perhaps showing a gap between the expected and the actual household duties of women (i, no. 180). The Paston household was an economic and political as well as a domestic unit, and Margaret’s responsibilities as its housewife correspondingly various.

Women’s notional placement within the household may thus include activities for its benefit which take place elsewhere: the household is as much a metaphorical concept as a concrete location. Even when inside her household, a woman is not necessarily in private in the sense of being free from observation: Karma Lochrie argues that though women may represent the
private sphere for men, this function exposes women themselves to scrutiny. The household can be imagined as a theatre in which all members perform their assigned roles, observed by the others. Although duties are often shared, roles are gendered: women must perform as good women. Even within the household, values attach to different spaces, and how a woman’s presence registers varies. It is possible that the few women in an elite household such as Sir John Howard’s would have been confined to certain parts of the building. Roberta Gilchrist argues that the architecture of high-status households constructs a series of consistent binary divisions between public and private, male and female, hall and chamber. The Ménagier de Paris emphasizes Lucretia’s chastity by locating her not only at home, but also in the inaccessible heart of her household ‘within and in the innermost part of her house [dedans et ou plus parfont de son hostel], in a great chamber far from the road’.

Mark Girouard assembles evidence that it was common practice for women to feast alone in chambers while the masculine household ate in the hall. A tale in The Book of the Knight of the Tower confirms the practice, and also raises the possibility that these different spaces might produce different gendered perspectives. In this exemplum, ‘it happed at a feste that thre grete ladyes satte in a Closette / and spaken of theyr good auentures’, discovering in the course of this conversation that they have all been courted by the same man, Boucicaut, ‘a wyse man / and wel bespoken amonge alle other knyghtes’ (p. 43). They send for him – presumably he is summoned from the hall, although his location is not specified in the text – and proceed to oppose the perception they have together developed in the feminine space of the closet to that of the masculine-dominated hall: ‘we supposed that ye had ben feithfull and trewe / And ye are not but a trompeur [deceiver] and a mockar of ladyes’ (p. 44). The text hastens to close down the subversive potential of the closet, having Boucicaut storm out in a temper leaving the ladies ‘more abasshed than he was’, but nevertheless, surely unintentionally, leaves open the possibility – or the fear – that gendered spaces may produce gendered values, and that female seclusion might also function as freedom from observation.

However, the gendered association of women with the private and men with the public parts of the household is not necessarily a full representation of medieval practice. The picture is complicated by the general retreat of the elite, both men and women, from hall to chambers during the later Middle Ages: relative privacy speaks of status as well as gender. Other evidence suggests that gender segregation within the household was not always total. Women who headed households certainly could not be entirely secluded. Christine de Pizan’s Treasure instructs the wise princess to dine in hall ‘ordinarily, and especially on solemn days and feast days’ (p. 61). Bishop
Grosseteste’s rules for the Countess of Lincoln have a gender-neutral conception of lordship, in which a lord who happens to be a lady is instructed to take a formal meal in the hall as a statement of status: ‘you yourself be seated at all times in the middle of the high table, that your presence as lord or lady [seignur ou dame] is made manifest to all and that you may plainly see on either side all the service and all the faults’.\(^{34}\) Women other than the head of household might also dine in hall: a fifteenth-century treatise places gentlewomen on the second table in an earl’s hall.\(^{35}\) Another version of the Grosseteste rules adds to the discussion of eating in hall: ‘Streytly for-bede ȝe that no wyfe be at ȝoure mete’, presumably envisaging a clerical household.\(^{36}\) Margery Kempe, however, reports dining as the guest of monks and bishops with some regularity: ‘sche was set to mete wyth many worthy clerkys & prestys & swyers [squires] of þe Bysshoppys, and þe Bysshop hym-self sent hir ful gentylly of hys own mees [portion]’ (pp. 34–5; cf. pp. 26, 109).

Women, therefore, might in some circumstances appear in the hall, and men likewise in the chamber. Kim Phillips critiques Gilchrist’s analysis, citing literary and historical evidence that suggests that although noblewomen might usually have slept, worshipped, and given birth in all-female company, at other times they mingled with men.\(^{37}\) As the same rooms were used for different purposes at different times of the day – a chamber might function as dining-room, reception-room, and bedroom – it is only for limited periods of time that any space could have been designated as unambiguously private. Certainly, the lord and his intimates would have access to the chambers, and even in their absence, male attendants would serve the women. Eleanor de Montfort employed one Roger of the Chamber to organize her baths.\(^{38}\) Christine de Pizan’s *Treasure* advises princesses to employ married men for service in chambers, and warns against men who visit ‘to play and divert themselves in the apartments of the ladies and maidens’ (pp. 86, 117). The ladies in the Knight’s exemplum do not hesitate to invite Boucicaut into their closet, and in another of his stories, a knight’s wife is punished for eating privately in her ‘garderobe’ with her husband’s clerk and servants: in this space, ‘the men and wymmen iaped [played, fooled around] to geder eche with other’ (p. 18). As with the Boucicaut story, an enclosed space to which women are confined can be reinterpreted as a secluded space within which women’s contact with men is invisible and thus unregulated.

If a woman’s invisibility in her chamber is troublesome, so too is her visibility at her window. The writings of moralists and poets use the window as the paradigm of the dangerous threshold, through which unregulated contact, threatening female chastity, may occur. Scenes of women coming to grief through the symbolic penetration of looking through windows recur in medieval writing, scenes in which reader and writer observe the woman
framed in her window as she simultaneously observes or is observed by the outside world. Christine de Pizan is in a minority in imagining a window scene in which a woman displays her exemplary performance of her household responsibilities: her wise gentlewoman in the *Treasure* supervises her estate workers from her window (p. 131). More typically, in men’s writing, such looking is dangerous. The Knight of the Tower retells the biblical story of David and Bathsheba as a warning to women against visibility: ‘This Bersabee ones kembed & wesshed her heer at a wyndowe where as kyng dauid myght wel see her’ (p. 107). The erotic potential of windows is such that the old woman in the *Romanace of the Rose* satirically advises girls to admit their lovers through the window even if the door would be more convenient.\(^3\)\(^9\) The Ménagier de Paris translates this sense of danger into practical instruction when he advises his wife to ensure that their younger maidservants are lodged well away from the windows of the house (pp. 219–20). The window scenes in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* are full of erotic disturbance, which is then moralized in John Lydgate’s retelling of the story. The conventional misogyny of Lydgate’s *Troy Book* writes sexual transgression in spatial terms, but assumes also that *any* space can be problematic:

(As seith Guydo), yit al day men may se
It shewed oute at large fenestrallis, [windows]
On chaumbres hiye, & lowe doun in hallis, [high]
And in wyndowes eke in euery strete; [also]
And also eke men may with hem mete [meet with them]
At pilgrymages and oblaciounes, [thanksgivings]
At spectacles in cytes and in townys [cities]
(As seith Guydo), and al is for to selle.\(^4\)\(^0\)

The evidence for women’s enclosure in inner spaces of their households is thus ambiguous, and their enclosure within the household itself does not amount to a literal, physical imprisonment. The enclosure may have been as nominal as the enclosure of nuns can be shown to be.\(^4\)\(^1\) Margery Kempe was asked whether she had her husband’s permission to make a pilgrimage away from home, but her response to the question: ‘Why fare ȝe wyth me mor ȝan ȝe don wyth ȝeðer pilgrimys þat ben her, wheche han no lettyr no mor þan I haue?’ suggests that the requirement was a technicality.
Like nuns, secular women may be visible outside their households so long as the purpose and manner of their public appearance is properly regulated, and for the details of such regulation, we turn to the conduct book.

Conduct literature works on at least two levels to produce the apparently voluntary containment of women within their households. It works to contain women literally, but also to produce women who have so interiorized the values of the household that they will carry them with them even when elsewhere. Peter Stallybrass outlines the threefold and mutually implicated enclosure of the chaste body, the silent mouth, and the closed door, which makes women ‘patriarchal territories’. All these layers are relevant here, but none are unqualified. Conduct literature directed to secular women does not order silence, enclosure, and perpetual virginity: total segregation may be recommended to nuns – and then as the statement of an ideal rather than a description of practice – but is never practicable for other women. For secular women, the body, the mouth, and the door cannot remain shut for ever. Nevertheless, their behaviour is still subject to gender-specific regulation. Conduct literature proposes an ideal of sober speech – in Christine de Pizan’s words, ‘controlled speech and sensible eloquence’ – faithful marital sexuality and journeys outside of the house to a limited set of places. The Book of the Knight of the Tower is, as Cynthia Ho argues, extremely anxious about the dangers of allowing women to speak, but even this text must allow women to advise and reprove their husbands in the privacy of marriage and the home: the Knight represents himself as being defeated in argument by his own wife’s superior sense and morality.

Conduct books typically offer their women readers a mixture of piety, instructions for self-formation, and practical advice on the running of households: they aim to produce a woman obedient to and yet also the trustworthy deputy of her husband, a regular churchgoer and astute negotiator, who can kill fleas, clean linen, order feasts, and keep her servants in order. The housewife is to be formed both within and alongside her household: keeping the two ordered are parallel processes. The opening of the Ménagier de Paris’s treatise on household management locates the production of a good woman in the private space of the marital bedchamber, where the elderly Ménagier recalls his fifteen-year-old bride offering herself as a blank slate to be formed as wife and housewife:

beseeching me humbly in our bed [en moy priant humblement en nostre lit], as I remember, for the love of God not to correct you harshly before strangers nor before our own folk, but rather each night, or from day to day, in our
chamber, to remind you of the unseemly or foolish things [les descontenances ou simplesses] done in the day or days past, and chastise you, if it pleased me, and then you would strive to amend yourself according to my teaching and correction.\footnote{46}

In conduct literature, the regulation of the self and of the household are complementary activities, the feminine version of the self-control required of elite men as a prerequisite to control of others. Thus the state of the household may be read from the state of the housewife. Her demeanour when abroad identifies her with the household of which she is the embodiment. The Ménagier cites the negative example of ‘certain drunken, foolish, or ignorant women [d’aucunes yvrongnes, foles, ou non sachans], who have no regard for their honour, nor for the honesty of their estate or of their husbands, and go with roving eyes and head horribly reared up like a lion [les yeux ouvers, la teste espoventablement levee comme un lion], their hair straying out of their wimples and the collars of their shifts and robes one upon the other’.\footnote{47} His own wife is to demonstrate her perfect discipline, which speaks of the perfect discipline of her household: her neat dress and sober demeanour testify to her contented husband, obedient maids, clean house, and generous hospitality. Eyes, as the windows of the individual, giving access to the interior, come in for as much attention as the windows of the household, with the Ménagier, the Knight, and the Good Wife all contributing their comments on the subject. The Knight, like the Ménagier, recognizes the discipline of the body as a symbol of the respectability of the household: a woman ‘stedfast in lokyng’ ‘shalle ye holde you in youre estate more ferme and sure’ (p. 25). The management of eyes is class- as well as gender-specific: as Phillips shows, the medieval lady looked ahead with a steady gaze, while downcast eyes signified social inferiority.\footnote{48}

In conduct literature generally, women may go to certain defined places outside the household without compromising their reputations: it is indiscriminate wandering ‘fram house to house’ which is forbidden.\footnote{49} The Knight assumes that his daughters will need to know how to conduct themselves in public situations: they may dance and sing at the feasts to which ladies of their status are properly invited, but should ‘haue alwey by ye somme of youre frendes or of youre seruauntes’.\footnote{50} They should, that is, remain literally surrounded by, within, their households, even when physically elsewhere. When outside, the good woman is to adopt a demeanour which exemplifies her control over her speech and sexuality, thus defining the nature of her interaction with the outside world. Conversely, prostitutes in many cities were ordered to wear distinctive articles of clothing: the need to distinguish them visually indicates that they shared public space with non-prostitute
women. In ‘The Good Wife Taught her Daughter’, modest conduct is a sign that a woman carries the protection of the household with her.

Aquinte noȝt with ilk a man þou metest in þe strete; [every]
þou he ȝiue him to þe, schortli þou him grete.
Lat him go bi þe wai, bi him þou ne stonde,
þat he þorutȝ no uilenie þin herte nóþing chonge. [through]
(p. 162)

The poem’s ideal is not segregation, but self-discipline: it envisages a daughter who will be in the street, who will speak to men in public, and who will have to use her own judgment in striking the proper balance of being polite without being flirtatious. She is not signalling her unavailability, exactly, but the severely restricted terms of her availability: she must demonstrate by her dress and behaviour that she is neither a ‘gentyll woman, or a callot’. A young woman visible in public must expect constant scrutiny, but the poem wants to train her to be a subject as well as an object: she must speak, look, and act. The Good Wife also tells her daughter how to deal with an offer of marriage: ‘Scheu hit to þine frendes, no forhele [conceal] hit noȝt. / Sit noȝt bi him, no stond, þar sunne [sin] mai be wroȝt’ (p. 158). Instruction is necessary precisely because the young woman is assumed to have enough mobility and autonomy to meet a suitor in private, should she so choose, and to make her own decision about whether to accept an offer of marriage. In attempting to limit her autonomy, the poem also shows its potential extent. Felicity Riddy argues that the intended audience of the poem would have included urban women working as servants, a group which included women who certainly made their own decisions about offers of marriage, as matrimonial cases show. Not all followed the Good Wife’s advice to discuss offers with their friends and many can be shown to have taken the initiative in courtship.

Ann Rosalind Jones defines the fundamental paradox of the conduct book: its investment in the conscious production of what it also claims to be natural behaviour. It is an idealistic genre: an aristocratic conduct book such as The Book of the Knight of the Tower ignores the responsibilities of estate management that the Knight’s daughters would surely have had to deal with, and substitutes the management of personal, especially marital, relationships and the development of individual self-discipline. It suggests that to become a lady is in itself a project. It is firmly gendered: where general treatises on estate management ignore gender, the conduct book as a rule confines itself to gender-specific instructions. The Knight’s daughters are offered advice on motherhood as well as general deportment, but nothing is said about the duties they would have expected to share with their husbands. The genre is open to analysis from the perspective of the performative

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construction of gender, because it explicitly demands the production of gendered identities in culturally specific actions. ‘The goode wif thaught hir daughter fele [many] tyme and ofte gode woman for to be’: being a good woman does not come naturally, but is the product of intense training, which the Good Wife can provide because she herself has been so trained (pp. 159, 170). Everything is legible and significant: dress, gesture, speech, and place all embody the discipline of which the individual is both subject and performer.

With performativity comes the potential for instability. The self formed in compliance with the conduct book’s instructions need not be regarded as inauthentic if the self is imagined as being formed from the outside in, or if the importance of the surface is emphasized, but the process certainly has the potential to go awry. Christine de Pizan openly acknowledges that being a successful princess demands self-conscious dissimulation: ‘she should be so wise and circumspect that no one can perceive that she does it calculatingly’. Shame lies in being caught out in such dissimulation: the stress on outward demeanour almost inevitably produces the figure of a woman who, if she chooses, could be other than her dutiful performance of good womanhood. The very existence of conduct books implies the presence of women who need their instruction because they are not already obedient to it. Their addresses and instructions to women readers unintentionally but unavoidably present different models of behaviour, different ways of being a woman: an alluring vista of flirtation, fine clothes, and trips to wrestling matches and taverns. The parents of Christina of Markyate, hoping to persuade their daughter to marry rather than enter a convent, quite logically reversed the instructions that would later be codified in conduct literature: they took her to feasts, encouraging her to dress well, drink wine, and converse freely. We have already seen how the story of the three ladies at a feast can yield a counter-reading: conduct books offer rich opportunities to the resisting reader. ‘Doutter, ȝif þou wilt ben a wif’, the Good Wife begins: thus assuming that the reader does wish to become a wife, but also, with that ‘if’, opening up other possibilities and other disciplinary programmes. Conduct books address the reader as dutiful daughter, willing learner, promising to induct her into womanhood. In so doing they produce excess, in the possibility that once so interpellated into subjecthood, she will become an agent and will have the option not to perform her womanhood in the recommended manner. The alternatives to good womanhood include the saint as well as the harlot. To return to the starting point of this chapter, The Book of Margery Kempe represents a medieval woman whose saintliness is marked precisely by its distance from the secular model of good womanhood to which she had initially been trained.
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1. The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS os 212 (Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 8. All references are to this edition.


25. Ibid., p. 391.
28. Paston Letters I, for example, nos. 136, 150, 154.
At home; out of the house

34. Walter of Henley, p. 403.
44. Christine de Pizan, *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, p. 57.
47. Ménagier de Paris, p. 9; Goodman of Paris, p. 50.
50. *Knight of the Tower*, p. 45.
53. Riddy, ‘Mother Knows Best’, p. 83; Goldberg, ‘For Better, For Worse’.
55. Christine de Pizan, Treasure of the City of Ladies, p. 69.
57. The Good Wife Taught her Daughter, p. 158.